

August 31, 2017

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road
Building II, Suite 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Dan Ruben:

First, I want to thank you for providing me with the opportunity to have this summer internship experience at the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP). After completing this internship, I have solidified my decision to pursue a public interest legal career, specifically, within the realm of LGBTQ justice. My experiences at SRLP were so transformative because I was able to work with so many inspiring colleagues as well as so many inspiring members and clients. SRLP works to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine their gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination, or violence. In order to achieve its goals, SRLP is organized as a collective, meaning all of its workers are also members of its board and have an equal vote. SRLP also allows transgender, gender non-conforming, and intersex (TGNCI) individuals, especially those fighting against poverty and homelessness, to become members with a vote as well. This allows SRLP to operate as both a legal organization and as a social movement organization.

In my role as a legal intern, I primarily assisted in helping clients obtain legal name changes and gender affirming government identification documents as well as in advocating for clients who faced discrimination in healthcare and the shelter system in New York City. When possible though, we assisted clients who faced discrimination based on their gender identity in other settings as well. For example, early on in my internship I spoke to a client who was verbally harassed while shopping at her neighborhood grocery store. She had been living in this neighborhood and shopping in this store for years, so she was shocked when a worker at the store began misnaming and misgendering her for all to hear.

She had come to SRLP to find a way to end such discrimination and harassment not only for herself but for all transgender and gender non-conforming people who shopped and lived in that neighborhood. We were able to work with her and create an advocacy letter to inform the store that, under New York City law, verbal harassment based on gender identity was against the law and could be used to bring a suit against the store, and, since our client worked with us to edit the letter, she was also able to learn her rights and become a stronger advocate for herself and her community.

Not only did I interact with clients, I was also able to interact with members who had previously been or currently were clients at SRLP. It was amazing to see folks who had experienced tremendous institutional oppressions such as homelessness and unemployment grow as members of SRLP. They became advocates and activists for their communities and helped me create

brochures and one-pagers to educate other TGNCI New Yorkers about their rights to housing within the shelter system and their rights to transgender healthcare under New York's Medicaid plan. It helped me see what Ella Baker's vision of a movement in which all the participants were leaders could look like in action.

As a native of North Carolina, I am aware of the stark contrast in resources LGB and TGNCI communities in the South have compared to those same communities in New York City. My experience at SRLP has emboldened me to initially pursue a public interest career in New York, and then to go back to North Carolina to help build institutions to serve LGB and TGNCI communities.

Once again, thank you so much, Mr. Ruben, for your support. These experiences and lessons learned would not have been possible without the fellowship from Equal Justice America.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mario Fitzgerald". The ink is a reddish-brown color.

Mario Fitzgerald

J.D. Candidate 2019

Brooklyn Law School